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CIVIL AND POLITICAL RIGHTS, INCLUDING THE QUESTION OF: FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

Written statement submitted by Reporters Sans Frontières, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement, which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[9 March 1999]

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Freedom of the press

1. Freedom of the press is treated with utter contempt by authoritarian regimes in 30 countries where nearly 2 billion people live. In another 65 countries, another 2 billion men and women must make do with a heavily monitored press. Approximately 100 journalists are currently in prison around the world for having sought to practise their profession freely.

2. In the **Syrian Arab Republic**, freedom of the press is non-existent: no free or independent media are permitted. Only three official newspapers are published. Foreign newspapers and State radio and television stations are strictly controlled. Ten journalists who were given sentences ranging from 8 to 15 years are currently imprisoned for non-violent activities; one of them is still in prison even though he completed his sentence. Systematic torture has been reported.

3. **China** continues to incarcerate more journalists than any other country in Asia: 12 of these, including three Tibetans, are in prison for practising their profession. Despite the release of the journalist Yu Gao on 15 February 1999, the Beijing regime has not loosened its grip on the press. The Chinese authorities have not given out any information about the journalist Shi Binhai, who was arrested in September 1998, or about Ma Tao, whose prison term ended in October 1998. In 1999, which marks the tenth anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre, at least three newspapers have been shut down and the few journalists who try to remain independent, such as those who work for Southern Weekend, have been kept on a tight leash.

4. In the **Democratic Republic of the Congo** the media suffer under a highly repressive judicial system. Journalists are arrested by intelligence agents without any explanation and subsequently held in detention without trial for weeks and even months on end. Since Laurent-Désiré Kabila took power in May 1997, more than 40 journalists have been incarcerated in this manner for fairly long periods; at the end of February 1999 three were still being held.

5. Access to information in the countries of Central Asia continues to be controlled by the authorities. The information blackout in **Turkmenistan**, a veritable bastion of authoritarianism, is total: there are no independent media and the foreign press is banned. In **Uzbekistan** a 63-year-old journalist, Shadi Mardiev, whose health is precarious, was sentenced to 11 years' imprisonment for "libelling" a judge. The first signs of an independent, critical press are appearing in **Kazakhstan** and **Kyrgyzstan**, but broadcasting remains under government control.

6. In **Myanmar** seven journalists are still being held in Insein prison in Yangon: given heavy sentences, they are held in harsh conditions and occasionally subjected to torture. The press and the broadcast media are entirely controlled by the authorities. No criticism of the authorities is permitted under the law.

7 In **Viet Nam**, despite the release of Doan Viet Hoat and Nguyen Dan Que on 1 September 1998, the Government still does not tolerate the existence of a free and independent press. Self-censorship is the norm, since the authorities regularly remind journalists that they must serve the Party and

its ideology or else face sanctions. Three Vietnamese journalists are still being held under Decree 31, which allows persons to be kept under house arrest without a trial.

8. **Cuba** is the only Latin American country in which the press is completely gagged. Journalists from independent news agencies - which are illegal - are viewed as "mercenaries of the American empire". After a period of relative calm following the Pope's visit in January 1998, repression of the media has resumed with a vengeance. Two journalists have been serving sentences of 18 months and 6 years since 1997; in 1998 a colleague was imprisoned for "insulting the Head of State" while another was sentenced to a year of hard labour for "actions against State security".

9. The civil war raging in **Sierra Leone** has already taken a heavy toll on freedom of the press: at least six journalists have been killed since the beginning of 1998, newspaper offices have been sacked and dozens of journalists are suffering on account of their views, especially those who support a negotiated settlement to the conflict or have reported atrocities committed by the rebels.

10. In **Belarus** "insulting" and "libelling" the President are punishable by four years' imprisonment or two years' hard labour. Government departments have been instructed by means of a confidential circular to stop all communication with non-governmental media, and State enterprises are forbidden to place advertisements in independent or opposition newspapers. The State Committee on the Press has authorized itself to suspend publications for periods of three months without the need for any explanation.

11. **Ethiopia** continues to hold more journalists in prison than any other country in Africa, with at least 13 currently behind bars. The authorities continue to use the Press Act, adopted in 1992, to subject private newspapers to legal harassment. Ethiopian journalists are often arrested and detained for months without any formal charges. Upon payment of bail they are released and nothing more is usually said. The frequency of this practice and the exorbitant levels of bail demanded ultimately undermine the financial situation of private newspapers.

12. The regime of Slobodan Milosevic in the **Federal Republic of Yugoslavia** has used the threat of air strikes by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to launch a campaign against the independent press: three daily newspapers and two radio stations have been shut down and a new information act which seriously threatens freedom of the press has been passed. The conflict in Kosovo has led to numerous attacks on journalists, especially Albanian journalists, some of whom have been held and interrogated at length by the Serbian police. For their part, the members of the Kosovo Liberation Army (UCK) have attacked Serbian journalists, two of whom were held for 40 days, with a third reported missing.

13. In **Turkey** some 10 journalists were tortured while in custody and at least 60 were assaulted in 1998. Nearly 260 journalists were interrogated or imprisoned over relatively long periods of time, including the noted journalist and author Ismaïl Besikçi, who spent more than 20 years behind bars for his writings on the Kurdish question. The number of publications seized and media censored has more than doubled since 1977.